10 Tips for Affirming Diversity and Supporting Equity in New After School Programs

he expansion of after school services in California comes in a time of great and increasing diversity across the state. The new sites and programs that will emerge have tremendous potential to help young people from all backgrounds and communities thrive, and to support them in developing the skills they need to grow and succeed in today's diverse, globally interconnected society. Along with providing learning opportunities and meaningful relationships, programs have the power to create dynamic environments where diverse participants are encouraged to be themselves and understand each other across differences. They can also offer support that helps reduce academic and social disparities and improve community life.

There is an incredible opportunity to make these possibilities real as we build and expand California's after school programs. The key is actively and intentionally developing them with an eye toward issues of diversity, access, inclusion, and equity. Since 2000, California Tomorrow has conducted research and worked with after school program and policy leaders on addressing these issues. We offer the following tips as starting points for new programs and sites – to help build diversity and equity into their work from the very beginning, and establish approaches for effectively serving all children and families.

■ **Establish a commitment to equity and inclusion.**
One of the most important things a program can do in laying the foundation for inclusive, accessible services is to begin by simply setting up a conscious commitment to these issues. This can be done by incorporating diversity and equity values into the program's overall mission, and/or by creating a set of diversity and equity guidelines to support program development, staffing, activities, and governance.

■ **Know your community.**
Learning about the community or communities in which your program operates helps in ensuring that, from the outset, after school services reach the children that need them the most, and that programming is relevant and effective to all groups you are working with. Key elements to understand include: who lives in the community (e.g. cultures, language groups, socio-economic groups, immigrants); demographic changes taking place; dynamics between groups; and community challenges, hopes, and needs.

■ **Hire staff that reflect the community and that understand diversity issues.**
Young people often respond particularly well to staff members who share their backgrounds and/or family/community circumstances. Many community staff also bring language and cultural resources that help with academic support and parent outreach, as well as offering important insights on effective program design. We therefore recommend, from the beginning, including staff from children's communities at all levels of the program – from direct service to management. It is also important to hire staff that understand diversity issues, respect all groups, and are comfortable working across differences.

■ **Provide staff orientation and training on issues related to equity and diversity.**
It is helpful to start early in developing staff guidelines and skills for addressing diversity and equity. Using staff orientation to begin discussions about community needs, standards of respect, and creating inclusive, accessible activities can be especially powerful for tone- and goal-setting. Deeper work can be done as the program continues. We suggest ongoing training on issues such as cultural competence, working with specific populations, multicultural and anti-bias programming, English Learner support, family diversity, and inclusion of disabled youth.

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- **Create a program environment that is inclusive, multicultural, and reflects the communities you serve.**
The way a program's physical environment is set up has a big impact on what young people learn, and on how welcome and comfortable they and their families feel. A tone of respect and inclusion can be established by including signs and announcements in participants' family languages, and by choosing wall hangings, posters, and artwork that reflect their backgrounds and provide positive, multicultural images. It is also valuable to display materials which offer messages of equity and inclusion, and which provide non-stereotypical images of gender, culture, class, nationality, race, sexual orientation, and ability/disability. Program spaces should be accessible to disabled participants and family members.

- **Incorporate attention to diversity and equity into program design.**
The design phase of a new program is an ideal time to build in structural and curricular elements related to diversity and equity. Examples of curricular pieces include: culturally-based arts and enrichment activities (e.g. ballet folk-lorico, civil rights literacy projects, Chinese brush painting, multicultural cooking classes); community leadership or service learning efforts; middle school girls' and/or boys' discussion groups; and bilingual or home-language based activities. Examples of structural elements include: conflict resolution processes; culturally-mixed activity groups; strategies for inclusion of participants with disabilities; and youth leadership and decision-making structures.

- **Look for program materials that are up-to-date and non-stereotypical, and that reflect the backgrounds and experiences of participants and their families.**
New programs often have the opportunity to choose materials such as books, games, toys, and videos for young people to use after school. When selecting materials, it is important to look for items that reflect the backgrounds of the youth you are serving, and that are up-to-date, with multicultural, multilingual and bias-free content. We recommend avoiding all materials with stereotypes of any kind – they can be very damaging to young people's self esteem and respect for others.

- **Build cultural relevance into your plans for academic support and enrichment.**
As programs begin to create academic support and enrichment elements, it is important to think from the out-set about how these elements can be most effective – especially for underachieving students, many of whom are low-income children, children of color, immigrants, and/or English Learners. Research from both school-day and after school contexts shows that, for long term learning, meaningful activities which are integrated with children's broader social, emotional, and identity development are much more powerful than worksheets and other isolated tasks alone. These activities can be especially successful when they build on children's cultures, link with their communities and/or incorporate their languages.

- **Develop inclusive outreach and application materials.**
An eye toward diversity and equity goes a long way in the development of program outreach and application ma-terials. Inclusivity can be built by making sure these materials are provided in the home languages of all potential participants. It is also important that these materials are reflective and inclusive of all types of families (e.g. single parent, two-parent, lesbian/gay parent, multiple parent/step parent, other guardians). We recommend developing expanded outreach strategies aimed at reaching all students and families, including those who might be harder to reach or have limited school connections.

- **Establish a Board or Advisory Committee whose membership reflects the communities served.**
Setting up an initial Board or Advisory Committee with strong community representation can help get the com-munity excited about your program, as well as ensuring that the program design is responsive to students' and families needs and values. To allow maximum participation from potential members, committee meetings should be physically, economically, culturally, and linguistically accessible.

For more information or support in using these tips, please contact
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